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EDITORIAL

Pain at the pump

Our position: Tougher requirements for fuel-economy would ease gas costs.

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Americans who hit the road for Memorial Day felt the sting of high prices, paying about 75 cents more per gallon of gasoline than they did a year ago.

Some politicians have tried to blame Big Oil. But the Federal Trade Commission reported last week that it found no evidence of illegal price manipulation behind the run-up in gas prices.

There are no quick fixes for high gas prices. Instead, it will take a long-term, multifaceted strategy that includes more emphasis on alternative fuels and conservation. Both would reduce demand for gas and ease upward pressure on prices. And one of the best ways to conserve is to raise fuel-economy requirements for cars and light trucks, including pickups, minivans and sport utility vehicles.

Cars and light trucks burn nearly half the oil consumed in this country. Yet fuel-economy requirements for cars have been stuck at 27.5 miles per gallon since 1990. Congress has repeatedly balked at proposals since then to raise them.

Opponents of increases in fuel-economy requirements have long argued that they would make vehicles unsafe and too expensive. But the National Academy of Sciences reported four years ago that "cost-efficient" improvements in fuel economy of up to 27 percent for cars and up to 42 percent for light trucks could be achieved without sacrificing safety or performance. Since the report, improvements in hybrid and clean-diesel technologies have increased the potential for boosting fuel economy.

Last month, a U.S. House committee endorsed legislation directing the Bush administration to revise fuel-economy requirements for cars. But there's little reason to expect the administration to order a meaningful increase.

Committee members didn't even set a target for the administration. And when the administration revised fuel-economy requirements for light trucks earlier this year, all it did was raise the average from the current 21.6 mpg to 24 mpg by 2011. The gas that would be saved from that paltry increase, over the lifetime of the vehicles to which it would apply, adds up to just a few weeks' worth of the nation's consumption.

Lawmakers would do much better to approve a bipartisan House proposal that would gradually raise fuel-efficiency requirements for both cars and light trucks to 33 mpg over

the next decade. This more significant but still modest increase would save 500,000 barrels of oil per day by 2015 and more than 2 million per day by 2025, according to the sponsors, New York Republican Sherwood Boehlert and Massachusetts Democrat Ed Markey.

Fuel-economy gains under the proposal would reduce America's dependence on foreign oil and cut air pollution. And they would save a typical car owner more than \$3,800 on gas over a vehicle's lifetime -- making future Memorial Day vacations a little less painful.